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B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 110 017 India

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sullivan, Graeme, 1951-
Art practice as research : inquiry in the visual arts / Graeme Sullivan.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-4129-0535-4 (cloth : acid-free paper) — ISBN 1-4129-0536-2
(pbk. : acid-free paper)
1. Art—Research. 2. Art—Study and teaching. I. Title.
N85.S84 2005
707'.2—dc22

2004015960

Printed on acid-free paper in the United States of America.

05 06 07 08 09 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

<i>Acquisitions Editor:</i>	Diane McDaniel
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<i>Typesetter:</i>	C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
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<i>Cover Designer:</i>	Michelle Lee Kenny

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INTRODUCTION: REVIEWING VISUAL ARTS RESEARCH

Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts argues that the imaginative and intellectual work undertaken by artists is a form of research. As an area of individual, social, and cultural inquiry, the visual arts have, for the most part, remained outside the mainstream of community debate. They are often seen as arcane and use obscure personal symbols that are difficult to interpret. Although no stranger to controversy because of their capacity to arouse and divide public opinion, as a serious social phenomenon, the visual arts remain mostly sequestered within a limited cultural and political orbit. At worst, they are seen as elitist; at best, visual arts are misunderstood. Even when included in schools and institutions of higher education, visual arts programs struggle for acceptance as important areas of the curriculum. In this book I argue that existing misconceptions about the intellectual status of learning in visual arts means that the scholarly, cultural, and social significance of art is grossly undervalued. To redress this, a detailed analysis is undertaken that explores the theoretical basis of artistic practice to position it within the discourse of research. What is presented is a theory of visual arts practice as research.

The approach I take is to examine visual arts as a form of inquiry into the theories, practices, and contexts used by artists. The critical and creative investigations that occur in studios, galleries, on the Internet, in community spaces, and in other places where artists work, are forms of research grounded in art practice. Rather than adopting methods of inquiry from the social sciences, the research practices explored here subscribe to the view that similar research goals can be achieved by following different yet complementary paths. What is common is the attention given to rigor and systematic inquiry, yet in a way that privileges the role imagination and intellect

plays in constructing knowledge that is not only new but has the capacity to transform human understanding.

● CHANGING DEMANDS OF VISUAL ARTS THEORY AND PRACTICE

As an area of undergraduate and graduate education, the visual arts have long been included in higher education programs. Yet the way the field is defined invariably influences how it is perceived within institutional settings. The traditions of the academy give rise to many different conceptions of the visual arts. When seen as a desirable experience in the liberal arts, the teaching of the visual arts rests on the capacity of an expert cultural tourist to enliven and enlighten students about art. In the humanities class, the methods are pedagogical, the data are observations, and images are experienced mostly as "art in the dark." When seen as historical inquiry, the study of visual arts builds on links between art history, fine arts, and the humanities, which means that established methods of research can be used and this ensures a level of institutional credibility. In the art history class, the methods are investigative, the data are antiquities, and the results mostly appear in heavily footnoted chronicles. When seen as the domain of the gifted or eccentric individual, the visual arts may be viewed with deference or indifference. In the studio class, the methods are iconoclastic, the data are idiosyncratic, and the outcomes are often viewed as social oddities. If seen as a form of cultural reproduction, the visual arts are seen as part of artworld practices that determine merit and worth. In the art theory class, the methods are often ideological, the data are constructed by figures of authority, and the outcomes are historical and social critiques.

In many countries, discrete art schools provided discipline-specific programs that mostly drew on the atelier traditions of the academy, or upon the internationalism of Bauhaus-inspired formalism and other modernist perspectives. The belief that artists cannot be "made" and therefore nothing much beyond skills can be taught prevailed throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries. Although art schools remained mostly separate from the mainstream of higher education, the demands of accountability could be met within the professional and vocational expectations of the artworld. However, with the changes in worldwide economic structures and the rationalization of industry and information services, no educational or professional discipline can remain isolated. By the beginning of the 21st century, art schools and teacher-training institutions in most countries had been incorporated into a university structure. As art practices become part of broader

systems of higher education, new questions emerge. For instance, while the sciences have their research paradigms, what is the equivalent of these in the arts, if any? How might visual arts practices be theorized as research?

While most undergraduate and graduate visual arts courses are located in universities in the United States, for the most part they remain discrete programs. However, with the need to institute “user pays” policies, the allocation of funding is becoming increasingly linked to productivity demands. This translates to a form of competition for resources and visual arts programs and art education programs consequently need to justify the research work done in academic terms. A challenge for many teachers in art programs is to define their studio-based teaching and art-learning practices not only as a form of professional training, but as scholarly inquiry. One argument I make in this book is that studio-based inquiry in visual arts will have greater institutional credibility if it is built on sound theoretical principles that can be shown to satisfy basic criteria for research practice.

Within the current professional, vocational, and educational demands there is an increasing expectation that visual arts and art education faculty and students are able to undertake research that has credibility within the academy and within the artworld. Consequently, approaches to visual arts research need to be positioned within existing frameworks but not be a slave to them. The thesis presented in *Art Practice as Research* is that visual research methods can be grounded within the practices of the studio and that these are robust enough to satisfy rigorous institutional demands.

LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT • VISUAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

In recent years, several discipline specialists published texts that deal with the topic of “visual” research and related approaches to inquiry. Generally there are three strategies followed by the authors of these texts. First, there are approaches that build on discipline-based research that have a tradition of using visual means of gathering and interpreting data. These titles draw on areas such as sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. The second uses a discipline approach but draws on areas of visual arts such as art history, art theory, and criticism. These research traditions are based on historical inquiry, literary-based interpretive strategies, and postmodern critical perspectives. A third kind of research genre is arts-based educational inquiry. Those who promote this approach see the arts as comprising a set of practices that helps broaden the way we understand things and thus can be used to expand how information is gathered and represented.

Several titles were published in recent years that focus on the use of visual means of data collection and analysis within social science disciplines.¹ Earlier efforts emphasize the way visual approaches such as photography and film are used in sociology and anthropology that mostly relied on descriptive documentation and content analysis. An inherent problem is the continued misconception about the perceived objectivity of visual recording tools such as cameras and videos (Ball & Smith, 1992). Some sources position the discussion of visual inquiry within research traditions in the social sciences, particularly in the area of social anthropology (Banks, 2001). The visual means discussed include those pervasive forms of cultural representation such as film, video, photography, television, and the like. In other texts, the relatively new areas of visual sociology and visual anthropology are introduced within a context of previous approaches and the arena of research practice is expanded (Prosser, 1998). These authors document a variety of ways that the "visual" is defined to include photographs, cartoons, and graffiti, as well as time-based media of film, video, and television and how visual information is used in research projects.

The problematic nature of how the researcher knowingly or unknowingly interprets images in the construction of meaning is an issue of ongoing debate. What is instructive is how visual information is compiled as part of research activity. Methods draw mostly from those techniques found in anthropology and sociology and therefore do not fully satisfy the interests and concerns of the visual arts researcher. Other texts locate theories and practices about "researching the visual" within trends in the social sciences and argue against the marginalization of visual data in research. For instance, Emmison and Smith (2000) argue that the "visual" is a much more complex social construct than that which can be captured in photographs. The conceptual framework they build is informative in the way it includes visual images, objects, events, and "visual traces" that carry meaning and therefore can be subject to analysis. A sense of the debate about issues such as the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of visual data is evident, yet these are never fully resolved or positioned in a way that could be applied in other contexts.

Other texts offer broad frameworks for considering the nature of images and how they can be researched and interpreted (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). A central theme is the way social and cultural practices are used to convey meaning using visual information. This raises issues about the kind of evidential bases that can be used to analyze how we might make meaning from these images. A useful heuristic is the way that the "interpretive space" used for analysis is located among several sources, including the text itself, the producer of the images, the surrounding context, and the position of the viewer. Although the politics of image making and interpretation are dealt

with within the realm of visual culture, they do not meet the needs of researchers interested in looking more closely at the visual arts. Often, both the interpretation and critique of meaning are seen as research goals. Consequently, the kind of knowledge produced by visual anthropologists and visual sociologists emphasize the researcher as “editor” rather than artistic “practitioner.”

Texts such as Gillian Rose’s *Visual Methodologies* (2001) bring together research traditions used in the social sciences and some areas of the humanities and position them within discussions of visual culture. Here visual culture refers to those pervasive forms of imagery, texts, and technologies that are produced and interpreted within individual, cultural, and political contexts. Rose expands the notion of research outcomes and explores how goals such as “truth” and “critical understanding” can be defined within a flexible interpretive framework of cultural and political practice. Rose’s text emphasizes a methods-driven rather than an issues-driven approach to research that limits its application across broader discipline boundaries. By contrast, Sarah Pink’s *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2001) offers a broader theoretical framework around which issues of visual data collection and interpretation are covered. Central to the author’s argument is “reflexivity” whereby the researcher becomes part of the emerging text, and this has an impact on how visual information is interpreted. Pink shows how reflexivity can be a conceptual asset in revealing information, but also an operational liability that can raise concerns about issues such as ethics. The important areas of visual technologies and visual culture are well positioned within existing discipline areas and paradigms of inquiry so that what Pink sees as distinctive about emphasizing the visual can be seen in context. Although *Doing Visual Ethnography* is an imaginative resource for inquiry, it is limited to the concerns of researchers in critical studies, media studies, and social sciences and does not accommodate the needs of those working in the visual arts. Pink’s text follows a strategy common to most research in critical and visual cultural inquiry in that it emphasizes the *critique* and analysis of phenomena, but has very little to say about the *creation* of new knowledge using visual means that might be undertaken within a research perspective.

There are many sources, old and new, that base their methodologies on practices more directly related to traditions in the visual arts. Methods of inquiry used by researchers in the arts and humanities tend to align more clearly with practices drawn from art history, art theory, and cultural studies (Berger, 1972; Cheetham, Holly, & Moxley, 1998; Edwards, 1998). Traditional stances describe the methodologies used in art history to investigate artworks, artists, and cultures (Adams, 1996; Fernie, 1995; Minor, 1994). The approach is to review the basic strategies for conducting inquiry that emphasizes particular forms, themes, or issues. Methods covered include those

that are part of longer traditions in art historical inquiry, such as formalism, iconography, and iconology, and critical approaches, such as Marxism, feminism, semiotics, poststructuralism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. These research methods reveal how various historical protocols can be useful interpretive tools that help construct and deconstruct visual arts in the studio as in well as in the library.

Other sources serve as a bridge that brings together methods often used in visual arts as ways of interpreting image forms such as those found in areas of art history, and the more recent excursions into visual culture that incorporate sociopolitical contexts (Bal, 1996; Barnard, 2001; Bloom, 1999; Heywood & Sandywell, 1999; Pollock, 2001). These generally explore the complexities of vision as a perceptual and cultural phenomenon based on the idea that while different ways of seeing are evident, these forms can be analyzed for valuable cultural and political ends. The discussions are often set within a framework that contrasts modernist and postmodern perspectives that open up broader research possibilities. Some issues and ideas that are central to contemporary art practice are covered, yet the full dimension of how visual arts can be seen within and beyond existing research traditions is often left unexplored.

The text edited by Al Rees and Frances Borzello, *The New Art History* (1986), captured the critical mood of the times and the understanding of the constraints that hampered a comprehensive reading of visual arts as cultural history. The authors highlighted how the research methods favored by the academy were part of a broader methodological structure that was questionable in light of the dubious theoretical assumptions on which it was based. This sparked a more socially centered and politically responsive attitude that included Marxist and feminist critiques, semiotic analyses, neopsychoanalytic perspectives, and methods of poststructuralism and deconstruction. To review this radical tilt at art history, Harris (2001) examined a sample of influential texts from recent decades that each captured a critical moment in this widespread theoretical soul-searching. Harris's analysis reveals that, well before the claim of "new art history" was made, as a methodological practice, art historical study was acknowledged as a process of theory-driven inquiry shaped by position and value. Furthermore, art history was seen as a field of discussion about arguments and principles, rather than content and methods. The opening up of areas of art historical investigation to include an ensemble of artworks, viewers, and contexts, not only introduced a greater range of critical methods, but saw content expand to embrace all areas of visual culture.²

Within educational settings, a trend to emerge in recent years is a similar attempt to expand the domain of inquiry, this time to more adequately

accommodate discipline interests in the arts. Loosely labeled “arts-based” research, those advancing this view call for a broadening of research practices that can take advantage of the way the arts offer unique insight into the human knowing and understanding (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Eisner, 1991; Jipson & Paley, 1997). Elliot Eisner, for instance, grounds his vision of inquiry in curriculum theory, artistic forms of knowing, and practices from the arts and humanities in his quest to extend the methodological scope of educational research.³ The methods deployed are mostly language-based, and like art criticism, rely on the power of the evocative word-image to capture the reality of the classroom. In his publication, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (2002), Eisner presents a more thorough exposition of his ideas. Although there is a consolidation of the cognitive claims made about artistic experience, his sensory-based learning and the insights that artistic knowing brings to the individual and the culture remain as a legacy of his writing from past decades and carry his structuralist and essentialist stamp. It is the persuasive arguments Eisner makes about the transformative power of art learning that comes closest to the thesis I present in this book.

In mapping an agenda for educational inquiry, most arts-based researchers in the United States locate new directions within the domains of education and the social sciences. Some proclaim the integrity of the artistic product as a site of knowledge (Barone, 2001), while others argue that the arts can enhance the direction and breadth of data representation and thus more adequately align research with complex realities (Cahnmann, 2003). Generally, however, the arts continue to be seen as agencies of human knowing that are drafted into service according to educational practices already in place. Jessica Hoffmann Davis (2003), for instance, in drawing on Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s notion of “portraiture” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997), describes how this arts-based methodology embraces ethnographic traditions, case study perspectives, and inductive forms of analysis. Yet for Hoffmann Davis it is the power of the “aesthetic whole” that is key to revealing a coherent, unified interpretation whereby “the research portrait is the result of a subtle synthesis of rigorous procedures that unite in an expressive aesthetic whole” (2003, p. 215).

The approach I take makes the case that informing theories and practices are found in the art studio, and the image of the artist-theorist as practitioner is taken as the locus of action rather than the arts teacher. Therefore visual arts research has to be grounded in practices that come from art itself, especially inquiry that is studio based (Sullivan, 2004). In addition, an axiom of research needs to be followed which accepts that different paths can be used to get to the same place.

● ART PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

The content covered in *Art Practice as Research* is divided into three main parts: *Contexts for Visual Arts Research*, *Theorizing Visual Arts Practice*, and *Visual Arts Research Practices*. *Part 1: Contexts for Visual Arts Research* provides the necessary historical context that positions the visual arts as a culturally grounded and institutionally bound area of artistic and educational inquiry. *Part 2: Theorizing Visual Arts Practice* argues that visual arts practice is a theoretically robust area of inquiry and a transformative approach to research. *Part 3: Visual Arts Research Practices* provides readers with a range of strategies and approaches to planning and conducting visual arts research.

Part 1: Contexts for Visual Arts Research establishes the historical and cultural basis upon which the thesis of the book is set. The opening chapter, "Pigment to Pixel," reviews the changing social and educational patterns of visual arts traditions from the private and public arena of the academy of the past, to the institutional and artworld academies of today. Topics covered include the changing ideas about art theories and practices. The status of the artist as a cultural lamplighter, human visionary, and educator is traced, along with approaches to the professional development of the artist and the challenge faced today in a world of cultural, institutional, and digital divides. Although the cultural relevance of art is firmly bound to different perceptions about its sociopolitical role, as an academic discipline and a basic form of educational engagement, the visual arts continue to be open to renovation.

Chapter 2, "Paradigms Lost," reflects on the powerful practices of inquiry that emerged as a consequence of the institutionalization of knowledge in the 19th and 20th century. The hegemony of the sciences is described in terms of the politics of authority and the rationality of progress that made it difficult for the visual arts to keep pace as a reliable source of knowledge and insight. However, the challenges brought forth by postmodernism, critical theory, and socially grounded conceptions of qualitative research offer new opportunities to reconfigure research practices. Consequently, in an uncertain world where assumed structures no longer serve as adequate explanatory models, the argument is made that different avenues to human understanding need to be pursued and that these are intrinsic to artistic practice.

Part 2: Theorizing Visual Arts Practice establishes a basis upon which visual arts practice is a form of inquiry that is sound in theory and robust in method and that can generate important creative and critical outcomes. Chapter 3, "Explanation, Understanding, and Beyond," examines the process of "theorizing," which is a basic procedure of inquiry and hence a core element in research. An accepted role of theorizing is to use conceptual

problem-solving strategies to analyze and synthesize things in order to explain them in ways that help to implement new practices. The argument made in this chapter is that explanation is an important goal of inquiry, yet there are aspects of human understanding that are beyond the scope of explanatory systems where insight is not the consequence of causal, inferential, or predictive means. Different kinds of theorizing are described that use methods that range from instrumental means–ends approaches to practitioner-based approaches grounded in reflexive thought and action. Debates about practice-based research and the institutional conditions that are shaping the emergence of visual arts research practices are reviewed. From this analysis a framework for theorizing art practice as transformative research is proposed. A “braided” metaphor is used to identify characteristics and structures around which visual arts research practices are described.

Chapter 4, “Visual Knowing,” examines the cognitive foundations of artistic practice. Simplistic dichotomies that align kinds of thinking and particular ways of knowing with the sciences, and forms of feeling with experience in the arts are rejected. It is argued that visual arts practice is a form of human understanding whose cognitive processes are distributed throughout the various media, languages, and contexts used to frame the production and interpretation of images. This is described in a framework for visual arts knowing. Drawing on research that examines the studio activities of artists, I identify a wider set of cognitive and contextual factors that influence visual knowing and describe this as *transcognition*.

The last chapter in Part 2, “Artist as Theorist,” argues that artists’ studios, and other such places used for the creation and critique of new knowledge, are theoretically powerful and methodologically robust sites of inquiry. In drawing together the arguments about ways of theorizing visual arts practice, I make a case for practitioner research where the artist-theorist can be seen as both the researcher and the researched. This chapter also focuses on the ever-expanding practices used by artists to advance our understanding of who we are, what we do, and what we know. Settings such as those opened up by digital environments, cultural collaborations, and community spaces are creating new places for creative and critical inquiry that offer opportunities for different forms of research and scholarship. I argue that artists explore these places in ways that disrupt assumed boundaries. The chapter also looks at how practice and theory merge as critical, curatorial, and cultural perspectives that are considered within the context of visual arts research practice.

Part 3: *Visual Arts Research Practices* has two purposes. First, visual arts research is characterized as inquiry that embraces cultural contexts, institutional settings, the digital environment, information arts, indigenous

perspectives, and other realms that open up new avenues for study. As such, visual arts research practices are presented as creative and critical investigations from which many other areas of inquiry can be pursued. Another aim is to provide strategies to assist with planning visual arts research projects. The challenge is to be able to provide useful guidelines yet resist the tendency to prescribe methods. For the artist-theorist, however, working within constraints, be they technical means, design briefs, or problematic positions, is a long accepted practice in the creative construction of new knowledge.

Chapter 6, "Practice as Theory," builds on information in Part 2, and argues that research, theory and practice needs to expand to cope with the way ideas, information, and communicative forms defy existing discipline boundaries. Artists, scientists, teachers, and others who see structures that define theories and practices as bridges, are open to ways of exploring hybrid forms of imaginative inquiry. This chapter also provides a framework for conceptualizing visual arts research projects that build on structures described in previous chapters. Dimensions of visualization are described using objects, data, texts, and ideas. Critical and creative practices for reviewing and designing research projects are also outlined that use visual experiences, exercises, encounters, and enactments.

The final chapter of the book, "Conclusions and Beginnings," draws together the arguments presented in the book. The point is made that if visual arts practice is seen as research, it will resist codification and methodological prescription *only* if any inquiry "starts with art." Furthermore, the individual, cultural, and educational significance of the visual arts means that artists, art writers, and art educators need to be vigilant advocates and artisans of multiple forms of inquiry to ensure what it is we do is understood, appreciated, and acted on by others.

● STRATEGIES FOR USING ART PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

The meanings made from this book are not dependent on the way it is structured. There is logic to the three-part organization as the arguments build on historical, conceptual, and practical issues in order to present a coherent theoretical framework that describes art practice as research. Yet these areas can be considered as independent positions, much in the way that a series of paintings can be both a discrete investigation that is context specific and also be part of an ongoing series that is part of a larger pattern of inquiry. Consequently the information presented in the book encourages readers to revisit and reconstruct their own meanings in ways that are personally relevant. Questions about historical contexts, research traditions, theoretical

quibbles, comparative critiques, or more practical guidelines for conducting visual arts research will lead to different ways of interpreting the text.

To encourage this kind of conversation each chapter includes sidebar components to supplement the text. The purpose is to provide examples and explanatory notes that will help to ground some of the ideas presented and offer points of departure for further discussion. In most cases these are anchored to illustrations of artists' work. It is seen as necessary to include examples as a way to confirm the depth and breadth of artistic practice, to illustrate the variety of ways that ideas are given form, and how projects are planned. Other components include diagrams that help illustrate concepts and their relationships. One of the central themes in the text is to promote the use of visual research strategies. Part of the challenge is to be able to show examples of how theories and ideas can be conceptualized and operationalized. Therefore several visual references are included, especially in *Part 3: Visual Arts Research Practices*.

The inclusion of the sidebars is based on my experience as a teacher and on my appreciation of how visual arts faculty and students access and use information. Like "reading" the artwork of others, there is a tendency to read chapters in several ways with the initial scan serving to give a "captioned" or instinctual overview of the information. Providing several points of entry throughout the chapters where the reader can absorb pockets of material and "talk back" to the information serves this orientation purpose. Thus there are several word-based and image-based areas in each chapter that contain discrete information, yet are also referenced to the chapter content. This dialogical emphasis should have the reader scratching pencil notes, drawings, and diagrams in the margins of the book as issues are raised, experiences challenged, or confirmed, and possibilities pondered. This element of discussion and debate is characteristic of visual arts inquiry, whether undertaken in the studio or in the public space of the classroom, gallery, or community.

The approach to visual arts research presented in this book is based on my experience conducting research with contemporary artists, teaching in higher education institutions, and knowledge gained from working in my own way as a practicing artist. Several research projects undertaken in collaboration with artists over the past 15 years ground the arguments presented and these are discussed throughout the text. Parallel to this work is my teaching at the university level. I have developed courses in visual arts research and currently supervise doctoral students working on dissertations that are extending the boundaries of research methodology and incorporate many of the approaches discussed here. Finally, there are things I do as an artist. An important point to be made that applies to me, and that has

probable relevance to many others, is that one's art practice, teaching profession, and research projects, all operate within a similar set of informing conditions and a sense of inquiry, and you are never quite sure of the outcome.

Let me conclude with a brief story of uncertain inquiry. Since the early 1990s I have been making Streetworks that are conceived, constructed, and confined to specific sites. These works are made from materials found in the street and begin as a reaction to things and places, proceed as a partial reconstruction and eventual resiting, and continue to unfold in unknown ways as other processes take over. The task of retrieval and renewal of found objects has a long tradition, and returning works made from these materials to the street maintains a process of change that is pleasantly obscure. As artworks they become nice friends to live with. Despite their change, however, their existence on white walls slowly drains them of their streetwise energy. Therefore, to place these works back on the streets, to attach them to walls, beneath bridges, along alleyways, in parks, or on rocks, allows them to be stumbled on by others. For me this reflects part of the educational role of the visual arts, because even if the life of the artwork is short, or the encounter brief, one never really knows the outcome. This uncertainty is by no means futile, for it is at the heart of what the visual arts have to offer if we dare to see things differently.

● NOTES

1. Several titles are published in sociology and anthropology as visual research methods texts. See, for example, Banks (2001); Emmison and Smith (2000); Heywood and Sandywell (1999); Pink (2001); Prosser (1998); Rose (2001); and van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001).

2. For an informative review of this transition from art history to visual culture and visual studies see Elkins (2003). The anthology edited by Heywood and Sandywell (1999) examines the expanded notion of the "visual," while the essays edited by Bloom (1999) explore visual culture from the perspective of gender and race.

3. In an article published in the *Educational Researcher*, Elliot Eisner (1993) argues for a broader conception of how research data might be represented to more adequately accommodate different forms of understanding. For an overview of the emergence of arts-based qualitative methods and a series of caveats considered in relation to the parameters common to psychological research, see Eisner's (2003) chapter in Camic, Rhodes, and Yardley (2003). See also a special edition of *Curriculum Inquiry*, 2002, 32(2), dealing with arts-based research. Retrieved on May 11, 2004, from <http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~ci/32.2.html>.